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C O N F I D E N T I A L BAGHDAD 002069

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/03/2019  
TAGS: PGOV ECON EAID IIZ  
SUBJECT: DIWANIYAH PUBLIC DISAPPOINTED WITH LOCAL GOVERNMENT

REF: BAGHDAD 1360

Classified By: Classified by PRT Diwaniyah Team Leader Michael Klechesk  
i. Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Three months into the tenure of the Diwaniyah provincial government, the public's initial optimism that the new team would improve services is eroding. Provincial authorities seem to be focused on the challenges at hand, but are burdened by budgetary woes and the effects of a drought, which is particularly devastating in this predominantly agricultural province. Governor Salim Hussein Alwan and other provincial officials told PRToffs that the central government is at fault for insufficient action on crucial services like water provision. The budgetary shortfall has led to numerous requests for PRT assistance by provincial officials.  
END SUMMARY.

DISAPPOINTMENT CENTERS ON CONTINUING WATER SHORTAGES

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¶2. (C) Early in the term of the new provincial government, the public harbored significant expectations for better services, albeit tempered by uncertainty (reftel). We see signs of growing disappointment and frustration that things have not improved perceptibly under the new leadership. Provincial Council (PC) member Widad Mohammad (National Reform Party) told PRToffs she is worried about growing public dissatisfaction with the apparent lack of improvement in recent months.

¶3. (C) Our contacts across the province identify severe water shortages as the main source of frustration. Although the public primarily blames Turkey and Syria for restricting water flow from the Euphrates River, the large agricultural community is displeased that provincial authorities have not done more to mitigate the impact. (NOTE: Water experts believe the problem primarily stems from the GOI's failure to adopt a coherent water management strategy, not with Iraq's neighbors. The Ministry of Agriculture is trying to cut back irrigated rice growing areas by one-half to minimize water-intensive crop production. PRT's Agriculture Advisors are disseminating information on techniques for more efficient use of water. END NOTE.) A sheikh in a rice-growing area in the province's western edge told PRToffs that though he is permitted to produce rice on half of his property, low water levels restricted him to grow rice on only 40 percent of his land. The owner of a 6,000 donum (one donum is 2,500 square meters) tract of land near Diwaniyah city told us that water shortages, combined with lack of sufficient electricity to run his pumps regularly, allowed him to grow barley on only a third of his property. PC Agriculture Committee chair Bak'r Sha'alan (Iraqi National List) criticized the central government for insufficient action on these issues to the press and to PRT.

Health Scandal Could Further Sour the Mood

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¶4. (C) Media coverage of the recent death of five patients after routine surgery will likely increase public frustration with provincial authorities. PC Health Committee Chair Thamir Naji blamed negligence for the deaths, telling PRT that doctors stored carbon dioxide in bottles normally used for anesthesia, then mistakenly gave the carbon dioxide to patients already under anesthesia in the midst of their surgery. Local authorities are scrambling to distance themselves from the scandal and initiate an investigation, but it appears to have put a further dent in the government's image.

A Vigorous Governor...

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¶5. (C) Governor Salim Hussein Alwan told PRT that he is satisfied with the security situation but concerned about essential services, investment and 90,000 unemployed people in his province. While praising Prime Minister Maliki, Alwan also grumbled about lack of sufficient financial and technical support from Baghdad. (NOTE: PC members, including Dakhel Saikoud (Da'wa) state that they lack budget planning skills, and have sought assistance from the PRT's public finance advisor. END NOTE.) The Governor claimed that the Ministry of Water Resources was more focused on the country's northern and western provinces, to the detriment of the southern governorates. The Governor was skeptical that the Planning Ministry had the capability to follow through on its plan to develop an industrial city in Diwaniyah.

¶6. (C) Asked about efforts to boost investment, the Governor said that a Turkish company was providing training to make Diwaniyah more investor-friendly and that some international investors were meeting with Iraqi provincial authorities in Turkey to discuss possibilities. He downplayed recent press reports of a major investment conference in Turkey. PC Industry Committee Chairman Saikoud was among several legislators who told us the province's effort to attract investors was proceeding haltingly. While there is general agreement on the need for investment in a range of areas, including food processing and housing, some PC members question why provincial and GOI officials are instead focused on building a regional airport in the province.

...And a Stable Provincial Council

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¶7. (C) By most accounts, relations between the Governor and the PC are adequate but far from excellent. Several PC members described the Governor as sincere in his efforts to make progress on various fronts, but added that communications and coordination with his office are sometimes strained. Governor Alwan told PRT team leader that the PC sometimes acted like an executive, rather than a legislative body, forcing him to "waste time" attending PC meetings to keep that body on the right track.

¶8. (C) PC members told PRT that the 24-member Council has had few internal political conflicts. The two Sadr Trend members have not obstructed cooperation with the PRT. The five ISCI members have been largely marginalized and make little attempt to play an active role in the Council. While Shi'a parties may be maneuvering in Baghdad ahead of the national elections, PC members tell us that this is not reflected in Diwaniyah.

Comment

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¶9. (C) The Governor and Provincial Council appear to be working well together. Nonetheless, we see a gradually mounting sense of disappointment with both among the public. A few significant accomplishments could change the public's perception, but the current trend is beginning to worry the authorities. They have accordingly looked to the PRT to help with projects, notably those involving essential services. The PRT's ability to respond quickly with useful

and well-funded projects may make an important difference in how provincial and local authorities respond to their constituents' needs.

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